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ABSTRACT

As educational demands change, it is important to continually adjust the operation of educational organizations, and this must not be a haphazard adjustment. The effectiveness and fairness of the adjustment changes according to who is viewing it. It is a complex process with great potential for conflict from the vantage point of students, parents, teachers, school administrators, local school authorities, the public, government, organized educational groups, and the courts. What one group sees as fair allocations may be viewed as totally unfair by another group. The school system is a product of the government and does not stand separate. The government is legally accountable for the products in education. Government intervention is imminent during shifts in educational demands. It would be a matter of concern if there was a lack of a sensitive assessment of the changing demands of the school system by the government. In America, state governments have moved toward more centralized control of local school districts. The government action in the United States, Canada, and Australia is called the inbetween response strategy (devolution whereby there is increase in control in conjunction with a decentralization of responsibility). Educational, economical, and socio-political variables affect this strategy. The government must listen to and respond to any interested groups. There must be an appropriate balance of educational and socio-political concerns. (SM)

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An Explanation of Government Response to Educational Demands

To overcome problems associated with the imminent shifts in educational demands, the operation of the educational organization is required to be continually adjusted. The adjustment cannot be haphazard or give the appearance of being so. Instead, the adjustment must be done effectively and in a fair manner. What is viewed as effective and fair however changes with the actor considering it. The complexity and potential conflict of these different vantage points is substantial when one reviews the actors involved: students, parents, teachers, school administrators, local school authorities, the interested public, government, organized educational groups, and more recently the courts. For example, members of a local school board may view its allocations from the government as unfair because it has left the Board in a position of having to seek great sums of additional funding from the local taxpayer and its ability to offer a reasonable program of study is not comparable to surrounding school boards. At the same time, the Board may consider the allocations ineffective because of when the funds are received. The Government, on the other hand, sees its allocations as both fair and

effective. The allocations are seen as fair because no local school system is at a disadvantage due to the geographical and/or cultural base of its community. The effctiveness variable is also seen as being satisfied for in the Government's perception each local school system is able to comprehensively address the required curriculum without having to supplement government funding. Although the example portrays a scenario involving only two of the noted actors, the potential conflict is quite obvious and this potential only multiplies as more actors are introduced. Amiss is the ordering of the voices of the actors.

The school system is but the product of the government. It does not stand separate from the government. Legally it is the government which is held accountable for the products in education. Therefore, as demands on the school system change the other voices in the arena are but consulting voices to an accountable government. Consequently, government intervention is as immiment as the shifts in educational demands. The effects of an overzealous government however are slowly recovered from. Perhaps one of the more illustrative situation within Canada can be found in the recent history of the province of British Columbia. The Government, finding itself restricted due to economic times and public

pressure to be more accountable for the ever costly school system, decided that the environment was ripe for an otherwise politically unsound decision. Control of education was centralized to the point that local school boards no longer had the freedom to set their budget without consultation with the Government. School boards not only had to be in consultation but the budget had to be acceptable to the Government. The price paid by the educational community was the lost of some programs, disenchantment of individuals working within the school system, and damaged necessary communication. As the socio-political-economic environment changes, mending is occurring but slowly.

As one can thus predict, the lack of a sensitive assessment of the changing demands of the school system by government would cause us all great concern. What occurred in the province of British Columbia was a sensitivity to the Government's need to address its period of economic retrenchment and the economic demands of its publics but in large measure an insensitivity to the educational demands on the school system. Although the specifics of the British Columbia situation are not necessarily reflective of other provincial or state occurrences, the government response of centralizing control is. In Australia, allocation and distribution

decisions once guided by the Commonwealth Schools Commission are now guided by internal sectors of the Department of Education. The Commission has become the implementor of policy decisions. American state governments as well have moved toward more centralized control of local school districts.

> The most dramatic shift of the last few decades has found states assuming a larger share of the fiscal burden of education and, at the same time, flexing their policymaking muscle in areas once left to the local districts (Sergiovanni et al, 1987, p.250).

The move of all three nations, Canada, Australia, and the United States, have for the most part been driven by an over preoccupation by all actors with the phrase equality of educational opportunity. More recently, excellence in education has been added. The problem is not so much with the concentration on equality of educational opportunity and excellence in education but the phraseology used. Each phrase is open to multiple interpretations. Yet governments, recall, have a legal obligation to society to ensure that the educational system serves its client, the student. Logically then, the Government's response will be one that serves its legal mandate and bests quiets the diverse prevailing interpretations and thus demands for equality of educational opportunity and excellence in education.

At times this has meant the allocation of further targeted funds. At other times a total upheaval of the operating allocation scheme has occurred. Oftentimes, a response somewhere inbetween has been adopted. Perhaps a good label for the inbetween response strategy is devolution whereby there is increase in control in conjunction with a decentralization of responsibility. It is this inbetween response strategy that best describes government action in Canada, Australia, and the United States.

The reasoning behind the adopted intervention strategy, devolution, can be explained by examining the dynamics of three variables. These three variables are education, economic, and socio-political. In the past, governmental action has mainly been based on the interplay between the economic and socio-political variables with little serious linking with the education variable. School systems are at fault along with the government for the absence of this latter linkage. School systems as the major voice for the education variable have spoken in a removed voice. This is to say, they have ignored, for the most part, the existence of the dynamics of the economic variable and the socio-political variable. In more recent years the recognition of the full interplay of the education-economic-socio-political variables has been the thrust behind government action.

This paper takes the reader through an explanation of the interplay between the noted three variables and how this interconnectiveness among the variables provides us with an understanding of government response to educational demands.

The Triangle Effect

The government is but a political unit and therefore does not operate in a vacuum. Its operations occur within a definable power structure that responds to the demands of formally organized interest groups (e.g., parental organizations) as well as powerful informal groups (e.g., taxpayers). For this reason, government has no choice but to listen to and respond to the voices of these groups. To ignore such voices would mean the Government finding itself on the other side of the legislative floor. Obviously the crossing of the legislative floor is not an action judged favorably by those doing the crossing. Needless to say, it is avoided whenever possible. This reality of government has too often been ignored by educators.

Educators have and do tend to let the agenda items for education be set by others. The studies of Duet and Newfield (cited in Kimbrough and Nunnery, 1988, p.461) exemplifies this situation. Studying the legislative

process in Louisiana, concerning a bill mandating a course on the free enterprise system, they found a definite lack of educational leadership in the lobbying process. The excellence in education movement is another example of the absence of educational leadership. The movement did not start as a result of an outcry of educators in response to areas that needed attention. Instead, the initiation of the movement came from public reaction to the book A Nation at Risk. The government being accountable for education has no choice but to respond. It is no surprise given the volume of the voice of those working within the school system that the response has been greater control through fiscal actions.

The more preferable course of action is one guided by an appropriate balance of educational and socio-political concerns. This implies that communication not just dialogue occurs between government and educators. Educators must acknowledge in a real way other concerns that government must account for and be accountable to in addressing educational issues. This is not to imply that government seeks only politically expedient action. Nevertheless, the apparent we-they stance of educators have resulted in government listening more intensely to the voices motivated by political and economical agendas. For instance, the equality of educational opportunity

and the excellence in education movements still occupy a high level of importance for government, educators, and the public; however, the fact is that they are very costly movements. The public (i.e., the taxpayers) demand for this educational product is tempered inversely with its cost. Furthermore, government funds are limited and education is but one area of its responsibilty. Health, trade and commerce, agriculture to name a few also compete for these funds. Consequently, the higher the identified level of achievement within the two movements, the harder it will be politically and economically to generate the required financial support. Moderation of the government's fiscal action will occur to the extent that it still can retain the taxpayers' and thus the voters' nod. Any influence that educators wish to have on this fiscal action must account for the dynamics noted. The dynamics increasing in importance when the environment is one of fiscal restraint.

Government out of necessity has allowed the socio-political and economic variables to dominant its actions in the field of education. Out of necessary because of the refusal of educators to acknowledge the existence of these variables within the context of the workings of government. To ensure a more balanced response by government to educational demands requires the active

participation of the education variable. Active in the sense that the triangle formed between the socio-political, economic, and education variables is equilateral not isosceles with the short side connecting the socio-political and economic variables.

Conclusion

The noted reality of government has and is often overlooked by those individuals and groups working within the school system. It is a reality that cannot be ignored by government in its attempts to address educational matters. The resulting we-they working relationship between the two must be replaced by a team approach. The equilateral triangle is the structure for the team. First step in this restructuring is the repair of the fray edges of the existing communication.

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